Nudes Gibbering: Isaac Rosenberg Entrenched

Ortwin de Graef

Abstract

Death in the trenches in France cut short the career of Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918) as a painter and draughtsman and as a poet. While what remains of his visual work is impressive, his literary legacy is increasingly recognised as exceptional. Harold Bloom has hailed him as the most distinguished Jewish poet writing in English in the 20th century, though he added that Rosenberg's real strength resided not in his famous trench poetry but rather in the quasi-Biblical prophetic fragments reminiscent of his precursor artist-poet William Blake. Yet it is as a trench poet that Rosenberg is chiefly remembered, to the point that even poems not set in the trenches are read as if they were.

Résumé

La mort dans les tranchées a mis une fin prematurée à la carrière de peintre, de dessinateur mais aussi de poète d'Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918). Plus encore que sa contribution aux arts visuels, qu'on juge importante, on estime aujourd'hui les textes qu'il nous a laissés et dont la valeur s'impose de plus en plus comme tout à fait essentielle. Harold Bloom trouve Rosenberg le plus important des poètes juifs qui se sont exprimés en anglais au 20e siècle, tout en précisant que la veritable force de son travail littéraire reside moins dans sa poésie de guerre, pourtant célèbre, que dans les fragments prophétiques d'un ton quasi-biblique qui rappellent son précurseur, le poète-artiste William Blake. C'est pourtant comme poète des tranchées qu'on se souvient de Rosenberg, à tel point que meme des poèmes qui n'appartiennent pas au context de la guerre sont lus dans cette perspective.

Keywords

Poetry of the Great War; war imagery; literature and trauma; Jewish literature; fluency disorder

"When will we go on with the things that endure?"

Isaac Rosenberg, Letter to John Rodker, 23 February 1918

On 28 March 1918 Isaac Rosenberg writes a letter from the trenches in Fampoux, Nord-Pas-de-Calais, to his patron, critic and friend Edward Marsh. When it is sent, the letter is postmarked 2 April 1918, one day after Rosenberg's death in a German raid on British lines. It is the last of Rosenberg's letters that has been preserved, quite possibly the last thing he ever wrote, and in this light its final sentence carries an uncanny charge: "My vocabulary small enough before is impoverished and bare".[1] In "Dead Man's Dump," arguably his most harrowingly achieved trench poem, Rosenberg had already imagined death on the battlefield as being "Joined to the great sunk silences" (*IR*, 116), but his last words to Marsh are more than an intimation of this ultimate muteness. Not only do they also perform the trope of inarticulacy prevalent in the literature of trench trauma (remember the "red wet / Thing" the speaker of Ivor Gurney's "To His Love" "must somehow forget"), for Rosenberg they signal something more specific as well: his relatively late access to English as the son of Russian Jewish immigrants whose first language was Yiddish, and who suffered from some form of fluency disorder.

Rosenberg grew up in what Diana Collecott has described as a "linguistic limbo," "a No Man's Land between Yiddish-keit and Englishness," and according to his most recent biographer "he was not fully introduced [to English] until he began school at the age of seven or eight."[2] Rosenberg is evidently neither the first nor the last English-language author with a mother tongue other than English. But unlike, say, Conrad or Nabokov, he found himself challenged to the limits of articulation in the face of extremity without recourse to dictionaries or thesauri. And compared to most of his fellow trench poets, most of them officers with a solid education, his command of English language and canonical culture was less than comfortable. If in Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum" the experience of the unspeakable can still be disciplined—be it somewhat suspiciously felicitously—in the frame of the sonnet-diptych, for Rosenberg the resistance of language to expression typically forecloses such measured outrage. Among the great Great War poets, Rosenberg is perhaps closest to David Jones, like him a private rather than an officer, but then Jones survived the war and had decades to recollect and record its ravages, while Rosenberg was reduced to scribbling away in the trenches on scraps of paper by the light of candle stubs as he sensed his vocabulary turning "impoverished and bare" and his time running out.

One such scrap of paper contains a pencil draft of "Louse Hunting," composed between the summer of 1916 and early 1917. (Figure 1.) Its opening word belongs to the same semantic field as "bare," but is rich in cultural and specifically aesthetic resonance—especially for a practising artist like Rosenberg, who was as much a draughtsman and painter as he was a poet:

1 Rosenberg 2008, 364. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Rosenberg's writings are to this edition (*IR* plus page number).
2 Collecott 1981, 269; Wilson 2008, 16, see also 117-18.

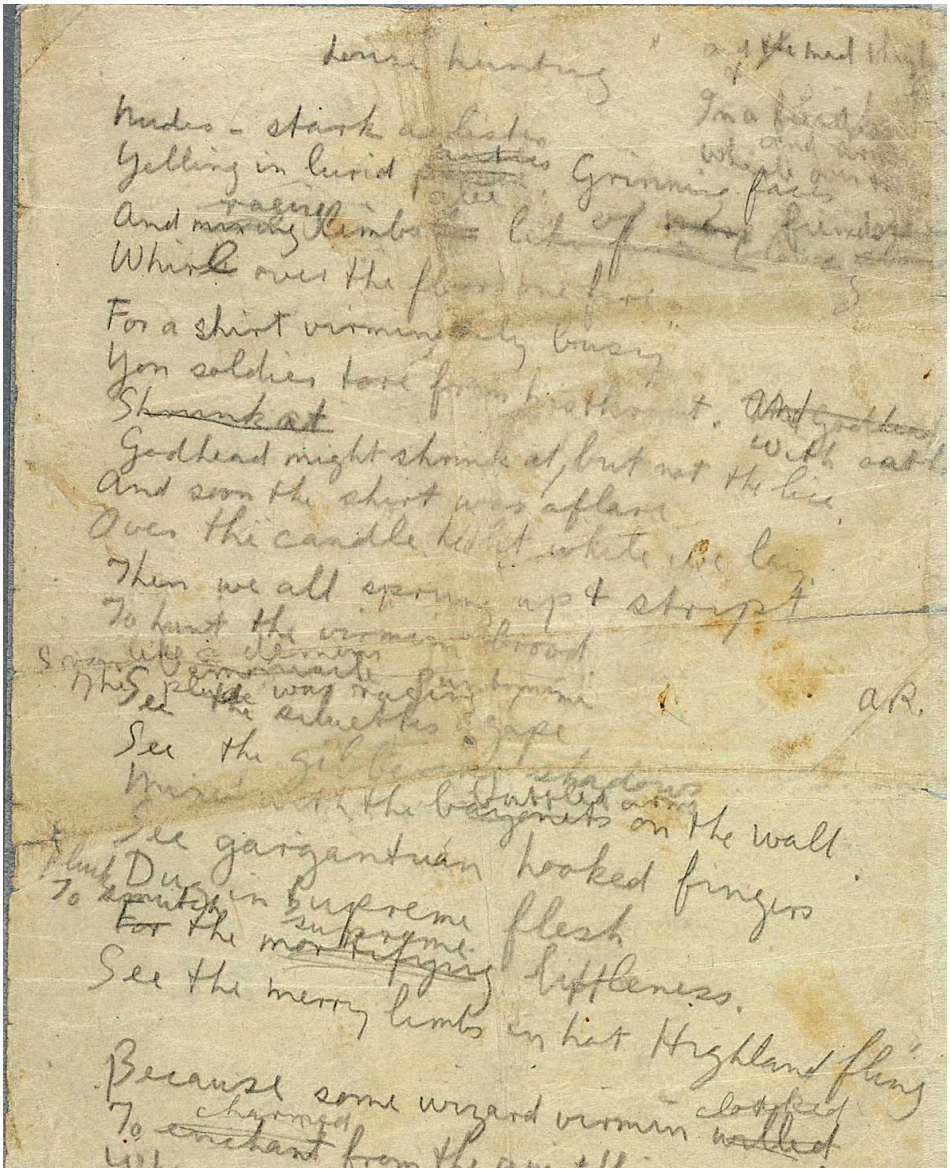


Figure 1. Manuscript of "Louse Hunting" by Isaac Rosenberg[3]

Nudes—stark aglisten
Yelling in lurid glee. Grinning faces of fiends
And raging limbs
Whirl over the floor one fire,
For a shirt verminously busy
Yon soldier tore from his throat
With oaths
Godhead might shrink at, but not the lice.
And soon the shirt was aflare
Over the candle he'd lit while we lay.
Then we all sprung up and stript
To hunt the vermin brood. (*IR*, 110, ll. 1-12)

3 "Louse Hunting," by Rosenberg, Isaac (1890-1918). The Imperial War Museum/The Isaac Rosenberg Literary Estate via First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford, accessed February 16, 2017, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/1479.

"Nude" is not just naked: it names the human body as an object of aesthetic contemplation and representation. As a student at the Slade School of Fine Art from 1911 to 1914, Rosenberg had ample experience in nude studies, and the three remaining charcoal drawings from the period show his command of the human figure. (Figures 2 and 3.) The sketch of the louse (or flea) hunt Rosenberg drew and sent to Gordon Bottomley in the spring of 1917 is lost (*IR*, 386), but to judge from the poem it is likely its figures would have been a far cry from the classical composure of his Slade studies. The arresting phrase "stark aglisten" tightens the poem's first line to sharp tension. "Stark" evokes "stark naked" as the unaestheticised other of the nude, while "aglisten" casts a lurid lustre over a "grotesque" scene which, as Jean Moorcroft Wilson notes, "brings out so sharply the obscenity of war"—where "obscene" evokes its probably spurious etymological origin as that which resists the scene, something seen that shatters the frame of aesthetic decorum and haunts on with a vengeance.[4]

Figure 2. Study of a nude woman by Isaac Rosenberg, Charcoal, circa 1912[5]

4 Wilson 2008, 5. Most published versions of the poem have "and glistening" instead of "aglisten". Here as elsewhere, I follow Vivien Noakes' compelling edition based on new manuscript investigation, though as Noakes notes, the state of the only remaining full draft of the poem is such that "No text can be final." (*IR*, 386) Paul Fussell has good thoughts on nude soldiers but only registers "Louse Hunting" as "a variant." (1975, 303)

5 ©The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence. http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=733066&partId=1&searchText=isaac+rosenberg&page=1, accessed February 27, 2017.

Figure 3. Study of a nude woman by Isaac Rosenberg, Charcoal, circa 19126

In his superb study of the "subjective" and "sensuous" "geography of the trenches" in First World War literature, Santanu Das shows how "Louse Hunting" "defamiliarise[s]" a "regular feature of trench life [. . .] into a phantasmagoria of movement and action," and observes that "the focus of the poem is not the action itself but its projection on the walls of the dug-out."[7]

6 ©The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence. http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=733064&partId=1&searchText=isaac+rosenberg&page=1, accessed February 27, 2017.

7 Das 2005, 73, 99..

Soon like a demons' pantomime
The place was raging.
See the silhouettes agape,
See the gibbering shadows
Mixed with the battled arms on the wall.
See gargantuan hooked fingers
Dug in supreme flesh
To smutch the supreme littleness. (*IR*, 110, ll. 13-20)

The "action itself" is what it is: a soldier driven to distraction by lice tears off his shirt which catches fire from a candle and his fellow soldiers follow suit in wild abandon. Rosenberg's intensely visual imagination seeks to capture the non-event as, indeed, an obscene scene, a perverse re-run of Plato's allegory of the cave. The repeated imperative "see" fixes us, addressees of the text, inside the poem's unsettling space, facing the scene, unable to avert our eyes or convert what we see into something that makes sense, yet at the same time compelled to do exactly that. The magnified silhouettes of the soldiers with their "gargantuan hooked fingers" offer an uncanny prefiguration of Max Shreck's Count Orlok in Murnau's 1922 film *Nosferatu*—except, of course, that the lice are the bloodsuckers, not the soldiers—unless their implication in the Great War makes them reluctant accomplices in industrial bloodletting. (Figure 4.)

Figure 4. Still from Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens (1922) by F.W. Murnau.

The projection of the soldiers' shadows on the walls of the trenches is an image Rosenberg is clearly eager to explore, as witness the repeated adverb "soon" signalling the instantaneity of vision: the shirt is "soon" "aflare" and "soon" "[t]he place was raging" in "one fire" casting grotesque silhouettes on the wall. True to the typical structure of trauma recollection, this insistence on the instant is uncomfortably coupled with an awkward repetitiveness and a reaching for a past before the instant: the poem begins with a vision of plural "nudes" in the trench "one fire" with "faces of fiends" and "raging limbs," then zooms in on a single soldier whose action occasioned the outrage, then returns to the collective mayhem of the opening image, and ends on a reframed view on that mayhem traced back to the quiet it disrupted:

See the merry limbs in hot Highland fling
Because some wizard vermin
Charmed from the quiet this revel
When our ears were half lulled
By the dark music
Blown from Sleep's trumpet. (*IR*, 110, ll. 21-26)

Wilson and Das make a good case for "Louse Hunting" as a poem recording the grotesque obscenity of war in general and trench life in particular. But Das is commendably puzzled by what he diagnoses as an "exaggerated theatricality" pushing the poem "to the brink of comedy" and "almost endangering our relation to the gravity of the theme."[8] Partly, that gravity has been of Das's own making, as he tries to connect the soldiers' louse hunting to the anti-semitic trope of Jews as vermin, which doesn't quite convince in this particular case; but the gravity of trench misery remains, and the poem is indeed marked by a measure of levity that may seem at odds with the rhetoric of the trenches we're accustomed to.

A simple answer to this puzzle is that "Louse Hunting" did not start off as a trench poem in the first place. It was included as one of twenty in the section "Trench Poems, 1916-1918" in the posthumous 1937 edition of Rosenberg's *Collected Works*,[9] but Rosenberg's correspondence, especially with Gordon Bottomley (incidentally one of the editors of the 1937 collection), indicates that the poem's original occasion lies well behind the trenches. Here is what Rosenberg writes to Bottomley in a letter postmarked 23 July 1916:

> I have plenty of amusing and serious material. Last night we had a funny hunt for fleas. All stripped by candlelight, some Scots dancing over the candle burning the fleas, and the funniest, drollest and dirtiest songs and conversation ever imagined. Burns 'Jolly Beggars' is nothing to it. I have heaps of material. [. . .]
>
> For the last week or two I've been on a quiter but more interesting job than trenches. I've got to rummage behind the lines among shattered houses and ruins for salvage. We come across all kinds of grim and funny odds and ends. More material for poem. I don't know how long this will last but it's fairly safe, anyway, except for stray shells which don't count. (*IR*, 305)

So it appears the poem began to take shape at a time of relative safety, with Rosenberg actively rummaging behind the lines to "salvage" "[m]ore material for poem" among the "grim and funny odds and ends" war bombards into being, instead of desperately recording the unimaginable materiality of trauma in what remains for poetry in the trenches.[10]

8 Das 2005, 102.
9 Rosenberg 1937, 79.
10 The fact that Rosenberg refers to fleas rather than lice here does not disqualify this letter as the earliest surviving trace of what was to become "Louse Hunting". In a letter to Bottomley postmarked 5 January 1917, he mentions that he had been thinking about "the louse hunt" but has not had a "chance of working on it properly" (*IR*, 325). In a later letter postmarked February 19 1917,

Perhaps we have been taking "Louse Hunting" a little too seriously: as late as early February 1917, Rosenberg still refers to the poem's now lost companion sketch as "an amusing little thing called 'the louse hunt'" and announces he is "trying to write one as well." (*IR*, 327) Rereading the poem in this light, it becomes harder to see it as the canonical trench trauma text it has nonetheless become. Clearly, the mere fact that the original occasion for the poem did not occur in the trenches but most probably in a barn at some distance from the front line does not as such disqualify it as trench poetry.[11] The text as we have it now might well have recast the original scene in response to Rosenberg's later trench experience, even though Rosenberg did not actually serve all that much time in the trenches between the original louse hunt behind the lines in July 2016 and the text of February 1917, and by and large stayed "out of the fighting until the end of May 1917."[12]

Precise dates and locations are hard to establish in the trenchscape. In August or September 1916, Rosenberg writes a letter to Sydney Schiff, another of his patrons. The final paragraph reads:

> I am sorry I can't date my letters as you ask but I never know the date and one can't choose your own time as to sending letters. I generally write when I see the postman coming to collect, if I get the chance. (*IR*, 317)

The letter includes a selfportrait flanked by scribbled script (Figure 5):

> Isaac Rosenberg his outer semblance? 22311 Pt I Rosenberg 11th K.O.R.L. B.E.F. I have gone back to the trenches & send you this souvenir. Above is my new address. The line above the helmet is the Germans front line 100 yards away. (*IR*, 316)

he writes "I am sending a very slight sketch of a louse hunt" (*IR*, 328), and in response to Bottomley's appreciative reply he then writes in a letter postmarked 8 April 1917: "I thought you would like the flea hunt, and your way of commenting on it is infinitely more superior to my sketch." (*IR*, 330)

11 Wilson, 339. It is worth noting that the section containing "Louse Hunting" in the first collected edition of Rosenberg's poems, also edited by Bottomley, is called "Poems from Camp and Trench" (Rosenberg 1922, 79), more accurate than the section title "Trench Poems, 1916-1918" in the 1937 *Collected Works*, which arguably reflects the emerging entrenched reading of Great War poetry. My thanks to Henriëtte Louwerse for bringing this to my attention.

12 Wilson, 333. See also the letter to Marsh dated August 4 1916: "Since I wrote last I have been given a job behind the lines and very rarely go into the trenches." (*IR*, 308)

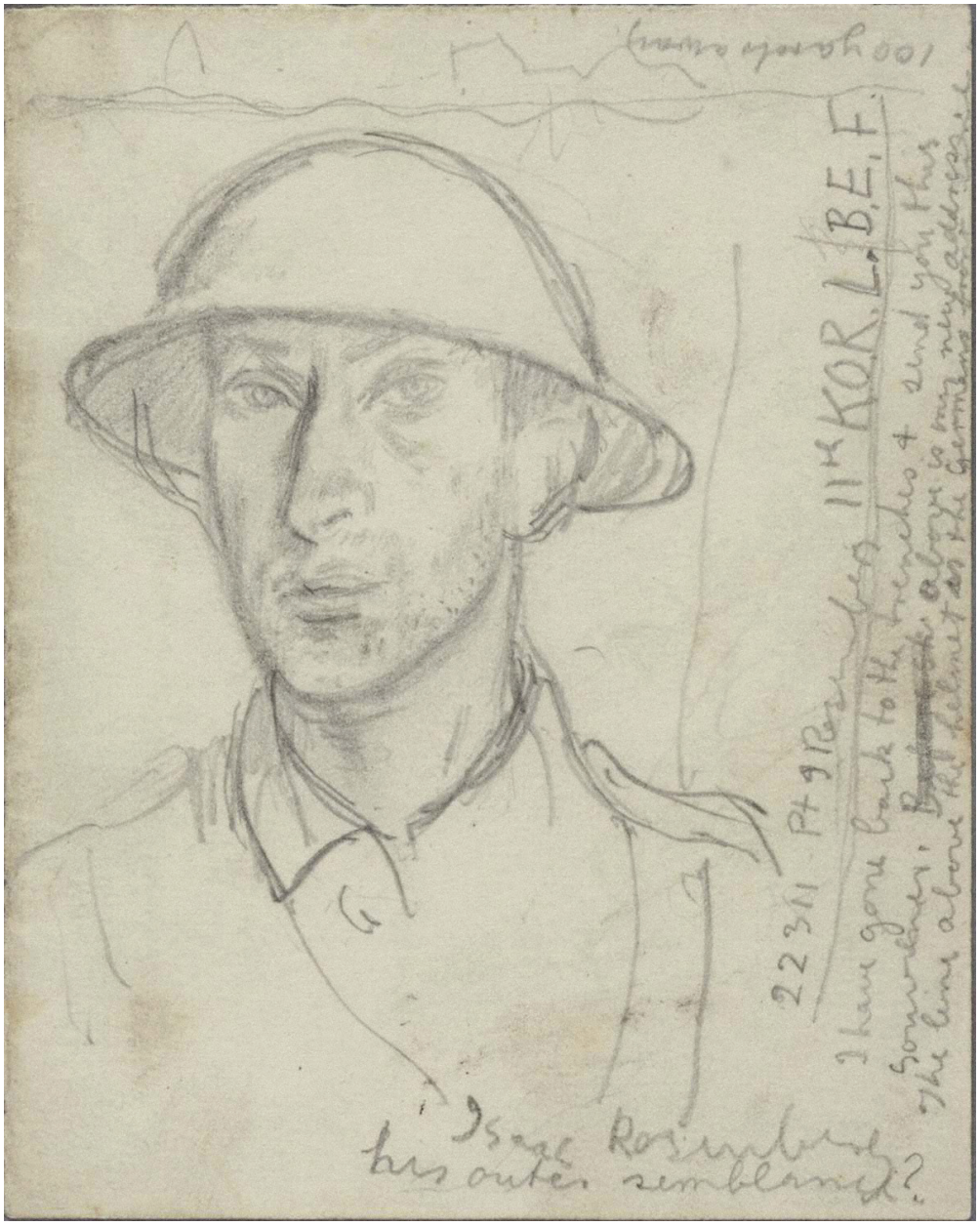


Figure 5. Self-portrait by Isaac Rosenberg, August-September 1916[13]

In the absence of clear and conclusive evidence as to where exactly Rosenberg was when he drafted and finetuned "Louse Hunting", it makes sense to trace the texture of the writing itself. A comparison with "The Immortals," another poem Rosenberg wrote around the same time, is instructive here.

I killed them but they would not die.
Yea! all the day and all the night
For them I could not rest or sleep,
Nor guard from them nor hide in flight.

13 "Self-portrait," by Rosenberg, Isaac (1890-1918). The Imperial War Museum/The Isaac Rosenberg Literary Estate via First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford, accessed October 12, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/1612. Note that the First World War Poetry Digital Archive identifies this item as part of a letter to Edward Marsh, while Rosenberg's editor Vivien Noakes lists it as part of a letter to Schiff (*IR*, viii).

Then in my agony I turned
And made my hands red in their gore
In vain—for faster than I slew
They rose more cruel than before.

I killed and killed with slaughter mad;
I killed till all my strength was gone.
And still they rose to torture me
For Devils only die in fun.

I used to think the devil hid
In women's smiles and wine's carouse.
I called him Satan, Balzebub.
But now I call him, dirty louse. (*IR*, 109-10)

Unlike "Louse Hunting," this poem is profoundly unpuzzling—pseudo-paradoxically so as a result of its being rigged up as a riddle: the identity of the "they" is only revealed in the very last line, when the implicit suggestion throughout that "they" are enemy soldiers or otherwise immortal zombie fiends is dismissed as the speaker pulls the louse out of his helmet. The riddle can only work—to the extent that it does—by dint of its eschewing descriptive detail: all we get is a general summary of unlocalised sustained bloody strife and torment. Precisely because of this under-determination, the poem lends itself well to transcription into specific detail—as spectacularly happens, for instance, in Peter Kuper's 2014 graphic adaptation, which firmly lodges the poem in the trenchscape. (Figure 6.)

Conversely, the intensity of detail in "Louse Hunting" makes the interpretation warranting such trench transcription much more problematic. To emphasise that "Louse Hunting" was both conceived and most probably composed outside the trenches is not in itself to suggest that reading it into trench territory is somehow wrong: the poem arguably becomes more powerful when allowed to release its energy outside its precise original context, and it is testimony to Rosenberg's poetic vision that his writing welcomes such dislocation. Yet proper tribute also demands that we witness this entrenched reading as misreading in hindsight and recover another force from the poem otherwise obscured by the intense visuals that capture our gaze and direct it to the walls of a trench that never really was: the violence of voice recalling the dirty "songs and conversation" attending the original flea hunt.

The poem's first line—"Nudes—stark aglisten"—authoritatively installs the visual register, but the start of the second line—"Yelling in lurid glee"—adds the aural, soon picked up as echoing the first stripping soldier's pointless performative "oaths / Godhead might shrink at, but not the lice." The salience of sound to the poem is also signalled in the earliest surviving draft, which opens on "Hush—hush & drouse / Into the dark. . . ah dark, ah taciturn music; / Sleep blows his trumpet", but the second (and only other extant) version moves this wish for speechlessness to the end of the poem as a condition rudely broken by the soldiers' yelling at its start.[14]

14 Rosenberg 2004, 134

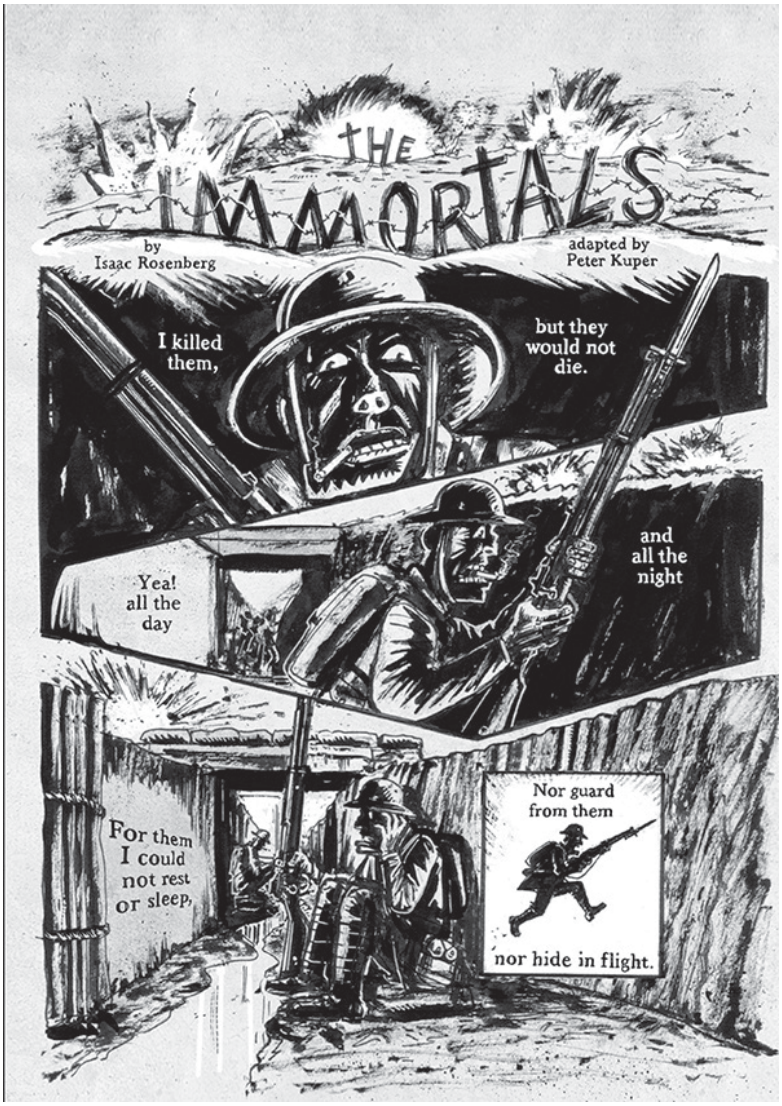


Figure 6. "The Immortals" by Peter Kuper, plate 1[15]

One line in particular powerfully captures both sight and sound in the scene. The poem first commands us to "See the silhouettes agape" and then breaks the silence of that dumbshow: "See the gibbering shadows". Apart from the yelling and the oaths, this "gibbering" is what remains in the poem of "the funniest, drollest and dirtiest songs and conversation ever imagined" recalled in Rosenberg's first letter to Bottomley about the "funny hunt for fleas." "Gibbering" is an arresting word. The OED's entry for the verb "gibber" reads "To speak rapidly and inarticulately; to chatter, talk nonsense. Said also of an ape."[16] Its first attestation is from *Hamlet*—"The graues stood tennatlesse, and the sheeted dead / Did squeake and gibber in the Roman streets"—and half of the six other quotations also involve ghosts, demons and spectres, while two of the four attestations for the adjective "gibbering" feature another spectre and a maniac. To "gibber," it seems, is to speak from the limit, from a region of the not quite or no longer human. The OED entry has not been updated since the 1899 edition (the most recent attestation is from 1877), but Rosenberg's "gibbering shadows" would certainly be fit candidates to join its ghouls' gallery.[17] Whatever "glee" is left from the original occasion has indeed turned distinctly "lurid," and the temptation arises again to read this as another index of trench

15 Kuper 2014, 43. Reproduced by kind permission of Peter Kuper.

16 "gibber, v.1." OED Online. Oxford University Press, June 2016. Web. 1 September 2016.

17 As would the speaker of Edmund Blunden's "Third Ypres", whose "squeak and gibber" (Blunden 1928, 291) in all likelihood echoes Shakespeare, but whose over-all record of ravage in the trenches at the Battle of Passchendaele (July-November 1917) also uncannily resonates with Rosenberg's "Louse Hunting" and indeed with his "Break of Day in the Trenches"—Blunden's field-mice pretty much impersonating Rosenberg's rat.

dehumanisation blanking out good dirty fun among fellow soldiers.

Yet "Louse Hunting" is not Rosenberg's only poem to use the word "gibbering": its first occurrence in what remains of his writing is in the short vignette now titled "In the Workshop," composed sometime before January 2 1911, and eerily prefiguring the later poem.

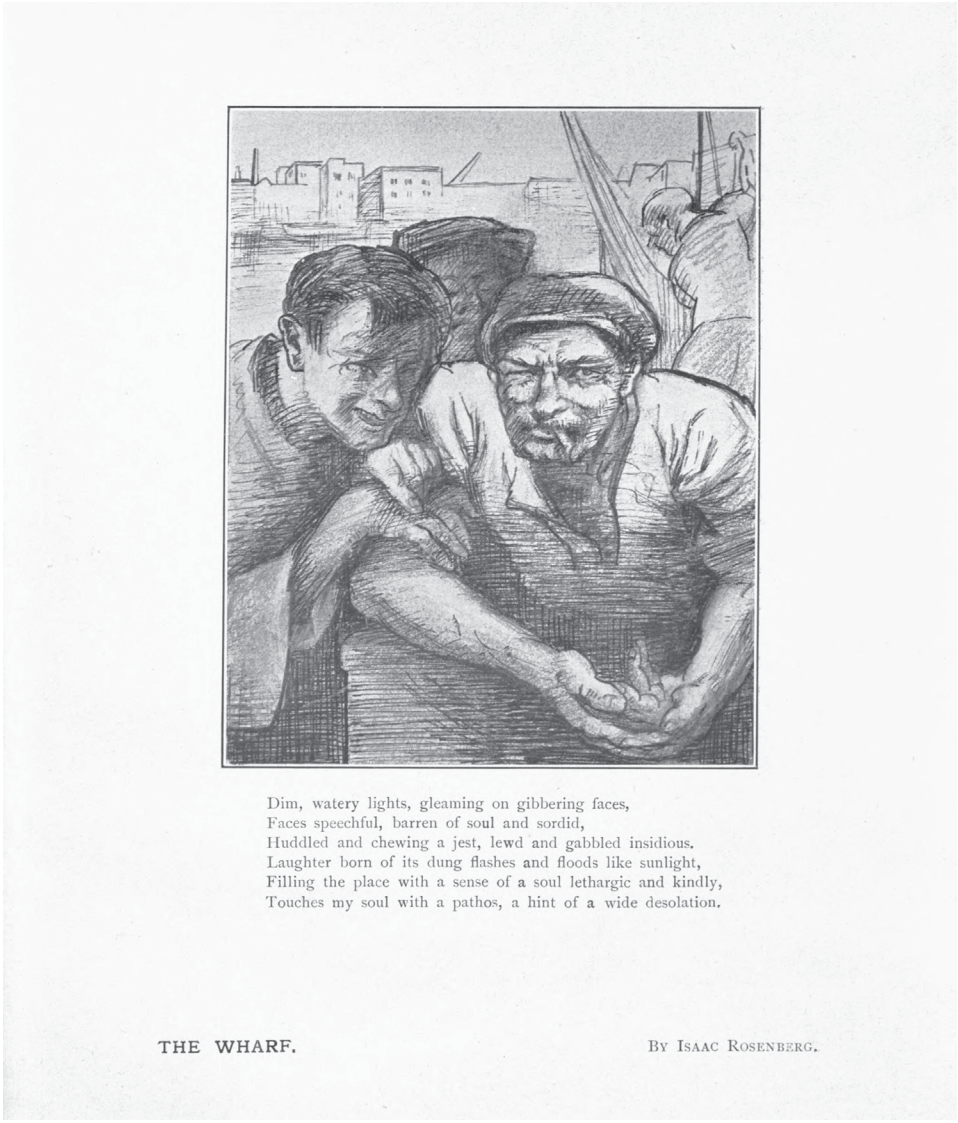
> Dim, watery lights gleaming on gibbering faces.
> Faces speechful, barren of soul, and sordid.
> Huddled and chewing a jest, lewd, and gabbled insidious;
> Laughter born of its dung, flashes and floods, like sunlight,
> Filling the room with a sense of a soul lethargic and kindly,
> Touches my soul with a pathos, a hint of a wide desolation. (IR, 9)

Like "Louse Hunting," this poem too sets out to register confined peopled space starting from the effect of light on human figures, and then animating the scene with vocal expressions of corrupted comedy. And as is the case in the later poem, there is some confusion about its exact location. It was written at a time when Rosenberg was employed as an apprentice engraver in Shoe Lane in the City of London, and the room it describes is most likely the workshop where he felt he was wasting his life:

> It is horrible to think that all these hours, when my days are full of vigour and my hands and soul craving for self-expression, I am bound, chained to this fiendish mangling-machine, without hope and almost desire of deliverance, and the days of youth go by.[18]

Yet when the poem was first published in May 1912, it appeared under a sketch depicting three men menacingly leering at us against a dockland background. The bottom of the page just reads "The Wharf. By Isaac Rosenberg." (Figure 7.)[19] The relation between text and sketch is puzzling. Rosenberg must have realised this since he changed the presumably original word "room" to the more neutral "place," which might just apply to an outside dock scene, though a sense of dislocation lingers.[20] But what does connect text and sketch, and dramatically contrasts both to "Louse Hunting," is the sense of alienation distancing voice and vision from the scene. The simplest evidence of this difference occurs at the level of the pronoun: there is no first person singular in "Louse Hunting", while the voice of "In the Workshop" issues from a site emphatically identified as "my soul" and separated from the "gibbering" others whose "speechful" faces are "sordid" and "barren of soul." Enigmatically, the laughter caused by their lewd jest somehow does fill the room, or the place, "with a sense of a soul lethargic and kindly"—possibly an afterimage of a common humanity now just about exhausted, leaving only "a hint of a wide desolation" touching only the speaker's soul.

18 Letter to Winifreda Seaton, before March 1911 (*IR*, 227-8).
19 Picciotto & Kohan 1912, 39.
20 The suggestion that "room" was indeed the original word is strengthened by the fact that this is also the word used in the version of the poem published around the same time in Rosenberg's privately printed pamphlet *Night & Day* (*IR*, 44).



Dim, watery lights, gleaming on gibbering faces,
Faces speechful, barren of soul and sordid,
Huddled and chewing a jest, lewd and gabbled insidious.
Laughter born of its dung flashes and floods like sunlight,
Filling the place with a sense of a soul lethargic and kindly,
Touches my soul with a pathos, a hint of a wide desolation.

THE WHARF. By Isaac Rosenberg.

Figure 7. "The Wharf" by Isaac Rosenberg (1912)

The speaker of the workhouse or wharf poem does not join in the gibbering and gabbling. Given Rosenberg's fluency disorder and the Yiddish accent that most likely affected his pronunciation, it is perhaps not too much of a stretch to read his evocation of disarticulated speech as an inverting projection of how he sensed he was heard by others: as "a horrible bad talker." (*IR*, 239) At any rate, the poem is a record of communication and community breakdown, leaving its speaker singled out in speechless isolation.

Neither the wharf drawing nor the workhouse text identify Jewishness as an issue in this breakdown, though their publication in a book accompanying a 1912 "Palestine Exhibition and Bazaar" clearly allied to Zionism makes it difficult not to entertain this association. Three years later, Rosenberg begins to explicitly establish the connection in his verse play *Moses*. The first, one-act version of the play, drafted in 1915, opens on a scene before Thebes as a pyramid is being built and two Hebrew labourers whisper about Moses. The first Hebrew distrusts Moses as leader of the Jewish insurrection against the Egyptians, since he is "their foster child" (*IR*, 170, l.2); the second Hebrew heralds Moses as the voice of dangerous deliverance:

The streaming vigours of his fire-forced blood,
Tempered by high august philosophies,
From his halt tongue is like an anger thrust
Out of a madman's piteous craving for
A monstrous balked perfection. (*IR*, 170, ll. 12-16)

Moses, notoriously "slow of speech, and of a slow tongue,"[21] is an unsurprising inspiration for Rosenberg, but instead of letting him lead his people from captivity into the promised land, Rosenberg does not imagine him beyond his calmly killing the Egyptian smiting one of his fellow Hebrews. The Egyptian himself does receive a more developed character as Abinoah, the father of Moses's mistress, but especially as a vicious Hebrew-hating thug likening the gibbering Jews to "locusts" and "lice" (*IR*, 172, ll. 91-92):

Dirt draggled mongrels, circumcised slaves!
You puddle with your lousy gibberish
The holy air, Pharaoh's own tributary. (*IR*, 171, ll. 56-58)

In the second, two-act version of the play, which Rosenberg worked hard to rush into print days before his first embarkation to France in 1916, the anti-semitism is even more pronounced. In this version, Abinoah, high on hashish as he is beating the Hebrew labourer, is questioned by Moses now disguised as a minstrel—emphasising his role as a model for Rosenberg. Abinoah bites back:

Harper, are you envious of the old fool?
Go! Hug the rat who stole your last crumbs,
And gnawed the hole in your life which made time wonder
Who it was saved labour for him the next score of years.
We allowed them life for their labour—they haggled.
Food they must have—and, god of laughter! even ease;
But mud and lice and Jews are very busy
Breeding plagues in ease. (*IR*, 166, ll. 366-73)

Like the first version, the two-act play ends on Moses's messianic vision of the "one impulse" he would shape "through the contraries / Of vain ambitious men" into "a nation's harmony" (*IR*, 168, ll. 451-52, 454):

So grandly fashion these rude elements
Into some newer nature, a consciousness
Like naked light seizing the all-eyed soul,
Oppressing with its gorgeous tyranny
Until they take it thus—or die. (*IR*, 168-69; ll. 464-68)

21 Exodus, King James Version, 4:10.

The text ends on strangely arresting stage directions:

> *(While speaking he places his hand on the unsuspecting Egyptian's head and gently pulls his hair back (caressingly), until his chin is above his forehead and holds him so till he is suffocated.*

The 1915 version is almost identical (apart from the unsettling adverb "caressingly"), but the 1916 text adds two more sentences:

> *In the darkness ahead is seen the glimmer of javelins and spears.*
> *It is Prince Imra's cohorts come to arrest MOSES). (IR, 169)*

The apocalyptic vision of a new consciousness bringing "gorgeous tyranny" of light fades into the glimmer of weapons in darkness. Written days before Rosenberg left for the trenches, these sentences cannot not spell the lasting suspension of messianic redemption as ignorant armies clash by night, even as this transposes *Moses* to the mudlands of French Flanders with less evidence than there is for locating "Louse Hunting" in the trenches.[22] Rosenberg continued to think about improving the play and as late as July 1917 he wrote to Bottomley that he meant to contrast Moses "with a Christ like man, which I may yet do." (*IR*, 338) But apart from some possible traces in *The Amulet* and *The Unicorn*, rough drafts of Blake-begotten mythical plays involving weird goings-on between different races he worked on until his death, this intention to re-engage with the messianic remained unfulfilled. The fact that the letter in which he announced it was accompanied by a fair copy of his poem "The Jew" is grimly suggestive in this regard.

> Moses, from whose loins I sprung,
> Lit by a lamp in his blood
> Ten immutable rules, a moon
> For mutable lampless men.
>
> The blonde, the bronze, the ruddy,
> With the same heaving blood,
> Keep tide to the moon of Moses,
> Then why do they sneer at me? (IR, 119)

The "naked light" of "newer nature" envisaged at the end of *Moses* dims into the old light of a Mosaic moon whose sway over humanity is far less comprehensive and fails to dispel racial animosity. Yet most probably written not long after "Louse Hunting," "The Jew" shares one crucial verb with the earlier poem which illuminates a decisive difference. In "Louse Hunting," the verb is actually a grammatical error, silently corrected in most earlier editions. But the only extant holograph reads "Then we all sprung up". The difference, again, is in the pronoun. As in the workshop poem, the first person singular isolates the speaker from all others, while in "Louse Hunting" the dominant pronoun is the first person plural springing all soldiers together into

22 For another echo of Arnold's "ignorant armies" sampled into Rosenberg's text, see Clausson 124.

something like new life—as Santanu Das notes, there is "a marked release of energy which seems to bind the soldiers together into a single, over-excited body."[23]

In the Rosenberg chapter in his classic *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War*, Jon Silkin argues that "[t]he war had less impact on Rosenberg's work than upon Owen's; it confirmed Rosenberg in the direction he had already taken."[24] As specific evidence, he remarks that Rosenberg "treated war as an intensification of pre-war social struggle" and further on adds that "comradeship, which such officer poets as Owen, Read, and Sassoon mention as being one of the generous and valuable human responses produced in war, Rosenberg does not touch on either in his letters or poems; and one guesses that what isolated him before the war continued to produce the same effect during it."[25] There is much to be said for this, and much has been said about this—so much, in fact, that it tends to deafen us to the sound of sound solidarity in "we all sprung up and stript," the blonde, the bronze, the ruddy, gibbering together in hot Highland fling.

Rosenberg spent the final months of 1917 in hospital, but in January 1918 he was back at the front. On January 26, 1918, he wrote to Marsh:

> I am back in the trenches which are terrible now. We spend most of our time pulling each other out of the mud. I am not fit at all now and am more in the way than any use. You see I appear in excellent health and a doctor will make no distinction between health and strength. I am not strong. ~~What is happening to me now is more tragic than the 'passion play'. Christ never endured what I endure. It is breaking me completely.~~ (IR, 356)[26]

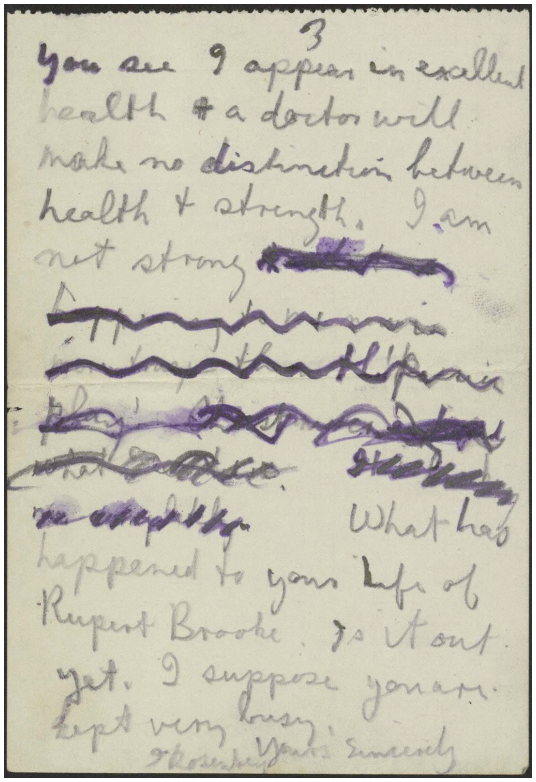


Figure 8. Letter to Edward Marsh from Isaac Rosenberg, January 26, 1918.[27]

23 Das 2005, 102.
24 Silkin 1998, 261.
25 Silkin 1998, 272, 291.
26 The First World War Poetry Digital Archive logs this letter as "date unknown." "Letter: To Edward Marsh," *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed October 13, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/items/show/8116.
27 "Letter: To Edward Marsh," by Rosenberg, Isaac (1890-1918). The Berg Collection, New York Public Library / The Robert

The censor excised the last three sentences of this passage, erasing Rosenberg's dejected entertainment of messianic memory, and anticipating his retreat into diaspora despair. The poem included in his last letter to Marsh two months later gives voice to this silenced isolation. Rosenberg had been trying to get transferred to the Jewish Battalion formed to fight in the Middle East, and wanted to write "a battle song" for them, but as he told Marsh he had not been able to come up with anything "strong and wonderful enough yet", and the poem he then inserts he calls "just a slight thing," suffering from the "impoverished and bare" state of his shrinking vocabulary. (*IR,* 364)

Through these pale cold days
What dark faces burn
Out of three thousand years,
And their wild eyes yearn,

While underneath their brows
Like waifs their spirits grope
For the pools of Hebron again—
For Lebanon's summer slope.

They leave behind these blond still days
In dust behind their tread
They see with living eyes
How long they have been dead. (*IR*, 123)

Rosenberg's most recent and best editor Vivien Noakes chillingly identifies this text as "the last of IR's poems to have survived." (*IR*, 394) The chill is in the contrast between the metaphorical survival of the poem and the literal death of the poet very soon after he last copied it out, but also in the initials "IR." It is customary editorial practice to use initials in annotations, but in this particular case there is an unsettling echo of the initials of the Jew who "never endured what I endure," *Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rēx Iūdaeōrum*—King of the Jews who now, two thousand years after his death, "see with living eyes / How long they have been dead."

Four days after writing these lines, Rosenberg was killed, together with a group of fellow-soldiers. Their bodies were only recovered some two weeks later, and as they could not be individually identified, they were buried in a mass grave. (*IR*, xviii) Only in 1926 was Rosenberg's corpse finally identified and reburied in St. Laurent-Blangy.[28] His family requested that the words "Artist and Poet" be engraved on the headstone over his grave. The Imperial War Graves Commission informed them that that would have to be at their personal expense. They paid the 3 shillings 3 pence. (*IR*, vxiii)

Graves Copyright Trust via First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford, accessed February 16, 2017, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5159.

28 http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/rosenberg/arras.htm

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Ortwin de Graef (1963), professor of English Literature at KU Leuven, is the author of two books on Paul de Man and has published widely on Romantic and post-Romantic writing ranging from Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, and George Eliot through Virginia Woolf and Pearl S. Buck to Hafid Bouazza, David Grossman, Alan Warner and A.L. Kennedy. His principal research interests are the Very-Long-Nineteenth-Century ideologies of sympathy, science, and the State reflected and refracted through the transmission technologies of the literary.
Email: ortwin.degraef@kuleuven.be